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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000595

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NEA/MAG (HOPKINS, HARRIS) NEA/PPD (FERNANDEZ, FINVER)

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: RHETORIC VS. REALITY IN TUNISIA ON WORLD PRESS
FREEDOM DAY

REF: A. TUNIS 522

- [1](#)B. TUNIS 514
- [1](#)C. 06 TUNIS 2856
- [1](#)D. TUNIS 330
- [1](#)E. 05 TUNIS 1141

CLASSIFIED BY: AMBASSADOR ROBERT F. GODEC FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: IN A SPEECH COMMEMORATING WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY MAY 2, PRESIDENT ZINE EL ABIDINE BEN ALI TRUMPETED TUNISIA'S RECORD ON PRESS FREEDOM, "AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS." ON MAY 1, NGO FREEDOM HOUSE RELEASED ITS OWN ASSESSMENT OF TUNISIA'S PRESS FREEDOM RECORD, AS PART OF THE NGO'S GLOBAL RANKINGS ON FREEDOM OF THE PRESS. IN RANKING TUNISIA 179TH OUT OF 195 COUNTRIES, AND LABELING THE COUNTRY AS "NOT FREE," FREEDOM HOUSE WROTE: "TUNISIA'S CONSTITUTIONAL GUARANTEES OF PRESS FREEDOM ARE IRRELEVANT TO THE GOVERNMENT AND HAVE LITTLE BEARING ON THE REALITY OF THE SITUATION OF TUNISIAN JOURNALISM." THIS CABLE DETAILS WHERE THE REALITY, WELL-CAPTURED BY FREEDOM HOUSE, DIVERGES FROM THE RHETORIC FROM THE PRESIDENT ON WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) BEN ALI RHETORIC: "TUNISIA CONSIDERS FREEDOM OF THE PRESS AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS. WE HAVE GRANTED INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION A PARTICULAR IMPORTANCE BASED ON OUR FAITH IN THE NOBILITY OF THIS MISSION, AS WELL AS THE IMPORTANCE OF ITS FUNCTION."

REALITY: DESPITE THE ABOLITION OF PRIOR-REVIEW OF NEWSPAPERS ("DEPOT LEGAL") IN 2006 (REF E), CENSORSHIP IS STILL THE ORDER OF THE DAY IN TUNISIA, BE IT EXPLICIT REVIEW AND CONFISCATION OF INTERNATIONAL NEWSPAPERS OR SELF-CENSORSHIP BY EDITORS OF BOTH PRO-GOT AND INDEPENDENT PAPERS -- WHO ARE WELL AWARE OF GOT REDLINES. FRENCH DAILIES AND A WEEKLY NEWS MAGAZINE FEATURING CRITICAL ARTICLES BY TUNISIAN JOURNALIST TAOUFIK BEN BRIK, INCLUDING AN ARTICLE IN LIBERATION ENTITLED "I 'VOTE' FOR BEN ALI" WERE BANNED IN LATE FEBRUARY/EARLY MARCH. WHILE SOME JOURNALISTS ARE PUSHING REDLINES (REF A), THEY FACE HARASSMENT AND THEIR PAPERS FACE FINANCIAL REPERCUSSIONS WHEN THEY DO SO. PUBLISHING HOUSE DAR ASSABAH SAW GOT ADVERTISING WITHDRAWN IN JANUARY AFTER PUBLISHING ARTICLES CALLING FOR GREATER GOT OPENNESS ABOUT SECURITY INCIDENTS BETWEEN THE GOT AND ALLEGED SALAFIST TERRORISTS IN DECEMBER AND JANUARY (REF B), ALTHOUGH IT WAS LATER REINSTATED. MEANWHILE, THE TWO TRUE OPPOSITION PAPERS, PROGRESSIVE DEMOCRATIC PARTY ARABIC (PDP) DAILY AL-MAWQIF AND TUNISIAN FORUM FOR DEMOCRACY AND LABOR (FTDL) ARABIC-LANGUAGE WEEKLY MOUATINOUN, HAVE MINUSCULE CIRCULATIONS DUE TO A LACK OF GOT ADVERTISING, ARE ON OCCASION CONFISCATED DUE TO ARTICLES DEEMED SENSITIVE BY THE GOT, AND ARE RARELY DISPLAYED AT NEWS KIOSKS.

[1](#)3. (C) BEN ALI RHETORIC: "TODAY WE ARE PROUD TO HAVE WIDENED AND DIVERSIFIED SPACES OF EXPRESSION, AS WELL AS GUARANTEES

AND INCENTIVES GRANTED TO JOURNALISTS SO THAT THEY ENRICH THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN AN ATMOSPHERE OF FREEDOM, RESPONSIBILITY AND RESPECT OF DEONTOLOGY; FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION BEING A RIGHT GUARANTEED TO ALL."

REALITY: WHILE THE GOT DID TAKE A POSITIVE STEP IN DECEMBER 2006 BY PERMITTING A NEW OPPOSITION NEWSPAPER, MOUATINOUN (REF C), THE TUNISIAN PRESS SCENE REMAINS LARGELY CLOSED TO DISSENTING VOICES. THE ONE INDEPENDENT TELEVISION STATION, HANNIBAL TV, CARRIES NO NEWS, AND NO PROGRAMMING ON SENSITIVE TOPICS. ONE PROGRAM THAT FEATURED INTERVIEWS OF POOR FAMILIES DURING RAMADAN, WAS CANCELED, REPORTEDLY UNDER GOT PRESSURE. INCENTIVES TO NEWSPAPERS, NOTABLY FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE, ARE GIVEN ONLY TO NEWSPAPERS OF POLITICAL PARTIES REPRESENTED IN PARLIAMENT -- THUS EXCLUDING INDEPENDENT OPPOSITION PARTIES PDP AND FTDL. THE GOT CONTINUES TO DENY LONG-PENDING APPLICATIONS FOR NEW RADIO STATIONS, NEWSPAPERS, AND MAGAZINES. IN DECEMBER, FORMER JEUNE AFRIQUE JOURNALIST RIDHA KEFI WAS DENIED PERMISSION TO PUBLISH NEWS MAGAZINE, L'EXPRESSION, AFTER INITIALLY BEING GIVEN A GO-AHEAD FROM THE MOI. HE WAS THEN TOLD DURING EARLY MAY HE COULD PUBLISH THE MAGAZINE, AS LONG AS HE WAS NOT NAMED AS EDITOR-IN-CHIEF. SIHEM BENSEDRINE, WELL-KNOWN PRESIDENT OF UNAUTHORIZED HUMAN RIGHTS NGO THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR LIBERTIES IN TUNISIA (CNLT), CONTINUES TO BE DENIED AUTHORIZATION FOR KALIMA, A BOLDLY CRITICAL NEWSPAPER FOR WHICH SHE SERVES AS EDITOR. THE GOT CONTINUES TO BLOCK ACCESS TO WEBSITES OF DOMESTIC AND SOME INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS, OPPOSITION GROUPS, AND WEBSITES WITH MATERIAL CRITICAL TO THE GOT, INCLUDING THE POPULAR OPPOSITION NEWS SITE WWW.TUNISNEWS.NET AND THE TUNISIA SECTION OF THE AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL WEBSITE. MOHAMED ABBOU, ARRESTED IN 2005 FOR PUBLISHING ARTICLES ON BANNED WEBSITE TUNISNEWS, CONTINUES TO SERVE HIS THREE AND A HALF YEAR SENTENCE.

14. (C) BEN ALI RHETORIC: THE PRESIDENT CALLED ON JOURNALISTS

"TO ADDRESS SOCIAL, CULTURAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL TOPICS WITH THE COURAGE AND SERIOUSNESS REQUIRED FROM THEM, WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF A JOURNALISTIC WORK THAT IS FREE, SINCERE AND COMMITTED."

REALITY: DUE TO THE PREVAILING CLIMATE OF OVERT CENSORSHIP AND SELF-CENSORSHIP, JOURNALISTS HAVE STRICT LIMITATIONS ON WRITING ON POLITICAL TOPICS, AS WELL AS CERTAIN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL TOPICS. ARTICLES DIRECTLY CRITICAL OF THE GOT RARELY APPEARED IN ANY MAJOR NEWSPAPER, WHILE ARTICLES CRITICAL OF THE PRESIDENT ARE STRICTLY TABOO. JOURNALISTS REPORT BEING DIRECTED BY GOT AUTHORITIES NOT TO WRITE ON SENSITIVE TOPICS SUCH AS LABOR STRIKES OR POLITICALLY SENSITIVE CASES SUCH AS THAT OF MOHAMED ABBOU. AS NOTED ABOVE, SOME JOURNALISTS ARE BEGINNING TO TEST THE REDLINES IN MAJOR PAPERS AND MAGAZINES SUCH AS LE TEMPS, ITS SISTER ARABIC-DAILY AS SABAH AND WEEKLY FRENCH-LANGUAGE MAGAZINE REALITES. HOWEVER, ON THE WHOLE, TUNISIAN NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES CONTINUE TO BE DEVOID OF ANY CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF GOT POLICY OR GOT AUTHORITIES. AFTER A INITIAL DEARTH OF COVERAGE OF THE NOTABLE ELECTION OF TUNISIAN HUMAN RIGHTS LEAGUE (LTDH) VICE-PRESIDENT SOUHAYR BELHASSEN AS PRESIDENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, SEVERAL MAJOR NEWSPAPERS AND REALITES MAGAZINE COVERED THE STORY. HOWEVER, UNLIKE THE MULTIPLE INTERVIEWS WITH BELHASSEN IN INTERNATIONAL PRESS, NONE OF THE ARTICLES IN TUNISIAN NEWSPAPERS MENTIONED BELHASSENS EXPLANATION THAT HER ELECTION WAS DUE IN PART TO A RECOGNITION OF THE LTDH'S LONG STRUGGLE AGAINST THE GOT (REF D).

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